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Conservative and centrist Republicans are pressing the House leadership to adopt reforms early in the new Congress to close loopholes and end tactics lawmakers have exploited to swell federal spending.

House conservatives intend to spend some of the political capital they believe they gained in the GOP's comfortable election victories, which many analysts attribute to a big turnout of conservative voters.

A top priority is to slow spending growth; many conservatives bit their tongues and accepted what they would otherwise reject as excessive fiscal laxity to help party unity and reelect President Bush.

The party's fiscal record since President Bush moved into the White House has frustrated and embarrassed conservative and socially liberal House Republicans alike. Federal spending has jumped 23 percent in the past three years, and discretionary spending, which Congress appropriates in annual and emergency bills, is up 39 percent, according to the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Those statistics are discomfiting to members of a party that seized control of Congress in 1994 with a platform of fiscal discipline and limited government.

House lawmakers have increased spending by using subtle tactics almost indiscernible to much of the House. Bills authorizing hundreds of millions of dollars have been placed in the suspension calendar, a schedule supposedly reserved for noncontroversial bills, such as those naming post offices.

The conservative and centrist caucuses account for more than 100 members of the GOP conference. They are vowing to make the party thrifty again even if that means confronting leadership.

They have already forwarded several proposals to House GOP leaders for inclusion in the rules package to be adopted at the start of the 109th Congress. If leadership rejects the proposals, the fiscal restrainers vow to offer amendments to the package that the GOP conference and the entire House must approve.

“We would like a very anti-spending tilt in the House rules and will go as far as the Republican members permit,” said Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), the new co-chairman of the Tuesday Group, a caucus of about 35 GOP centrists. “This all plays out just prior to the Congress resuming its work. That rules package is one of the key things we do.”

Kirk said freshmen will come to Washington with a “fresh mandate” to check spending. Veteran lawmakers are most receptive to spending curbs early in a session, Kirk said, immediately after they’ve been in contact with constituents who complain about the size of government and before they’ve spent too much time on the Hill, where the pressure to spend is constant.

Kirk is working with leaders of the 90-strong Republican Study Committee, giving the spending-reform effort strength enough to threaten to enact reforms even if the leadership is unenthusiastic.

Centrists and conservatives are confident despite failing to curb spending legislation this year when the House voted overwhelmingly against amendments to the Budget Enforcement Act. Reformers said several of their proposals won a majority of the Republican Conference, which is all that is needed to implement a change to the House rules. If a majority of the ruling party supports a rule change, it passes on a party-line vote.

“We’re proposing a number of rules,” said Rep. Jeb Hensarling (R-Texas), who has spearheaded Republican Study Committee efforts to reform House budget rules and procedure. “Our leadership is looking at them and looking it over.”

Kirk and Rep. Charles Bass (R-N.H.), the other co-chairman of the centrist caucus, particularly want to change the rules so that entitlement spending could be raised only if three-fifths of the House voted for it. Bass said a compromise might allow House leaders to waive that requirement through the Rules Committee, which would make the reform a less-effective spending restraint.

Kirk also discussed a new rule that would require House lawmakers to cast a roll-call vote on any bill that increased spending authority.

In the weeks close to Election Day, the House GOP leadership frequently attempted to pass hundreds of millions of dollars in new spending authority on the chamber floor by unanimous consent, in which a bill is adopted without a vote as long as no lawmaker objects. Spending authority is often increased this way when few lawmakers are on the floor to take notice, lawmakers say.

Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), a leading House conservative, said he was alerted in October to leadership plans to use unannounced unanimous-consent bills to increase spending authority by hundreds of millions of dollars wanted by Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), who was facing reelection.

Flake said he and Rep. Mike Pence (R-Ind.), the incoming chairman of the Republican Study Committee, “went running to the floor and got there just in time to block them.”

Another procedure to pass spending bills that reformers said is often abused is the suspension calendar.

Steve Ellis, vice president of programs for Taxpayers for Common Sense, said of the suspension calendar, “Increasingly, it’s being used as a way to cram through very expensive legislation relatively under the radar.”

H.R. 4175, the Veterans’ Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act, which was estimated to increase spending authority by \$466 million in 2005 and \$620 million each year after that, was passed in July under suspension. S. 2484, the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Personnel Enhancement Act, which will cost \$182 million in spending authority next year and \$763 million over the subsequent four years, was passed under suspension last week.

What many Republicans perceive as an abuse prompted Flake to propose a new rule that would require the leadership to issue waivers to bills that increase spending authority by \$100

million or 10 percent or more of its current level. The Republican Conference adopted the new rule during a lengthy meeting last week. That success bodes well, reformers said, for their attempt to enact additional spending reforms as rules changes in January.

By forcing the leadership to issue waivers for suspension bills, Flake said, he believes his colleagues will pay more attention.